

Left: Lt. Col. Todd Brace helps Capt. Matt Houck to don a flotation device as part of water survival training in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, April 16. Both Airmen are members of the 78th Air Refueling Squadron.



Right: Tech. Sgt. Jay Rosa, a boom operator with the 76th ARS, watches a demonstration during the water survival training class.



Left: Maj. Ralph Marshall, 78th ARS, helps demonstrate the proper wear of a rescue device.

Right: Captains Tom Conley (left) and Jermaine Boyd return to shore while participating in a water survival exercise.

The efficiency of paradise

Story & photos by Tech. Sgt. Shawn J. Jones

Sunshine, sandy beaches and bright blue seas weren't enough to distract more than 125 Reserve Airmen from a weekend jam-packed with training.

The Airmen, most of whom were from the 76th and 78th Air Refueling Squadrons here, packed into three KC-10 Extenders April 15, and flew to Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, for three days of air, ground and water training. The annual event is known as a "fly-away" and its purpose is to remove Airmen from the routine of their typical duty locations so that they may better focus

on refreshing their skills and learning new ones.

"Once away from base, we are able to aggressively schedule every minute of each member's day and ensure that all training needed for the year is available," said Lt. Col. Dan Edwards, 78th ARS commander.

Colonel Edward's statement can be taken quite literally. The training began before the Airmen left the runway. An extra large contingent of maintainers, boom operators and loadmasters worked together to prepare the jets and

load them with passengers and cargo. Those with more experience were able to share their tricks-of-the-trade with newer Airmen.

Once airborne, the aggressive training pace continued. The primary role of the KC-10 is to provide aerial refueling to other aircraft. An aircrew needs to be proficient at both giving and receiving fuel. The flight to Puerto Rico took more than three hours, which provided ample time for multiple pilots and boom operators to gain necessary experience at their respective functions.

The Airmen found further ways to maximize their time by conducting training courses while in-flight. One team taught skills necessary for surviving in a hazardous chemical, biological or radiation environment. Another team provided an expanded intelligence briefing.

Upon reaching Aguadilla, the pace continued. The Airmen held many of their training sessions at U.S. Coast Guard Air Station Borinquen. The station offered several amenities, such as on-base lodging and a community center which served as a classroom, that helped to minimize the overall cost of the trip, said Capt. Michael Petruska, one of the fly-away's primary organizers from the 78th ARS. The station's geography contributed to the training efficiencies as a combat survival class was taught in a jungle-like wooded area on-base and a water survival class was taught on a nearby beach.

Finally, the station's long runway and dry weather provided conditions that allowed for more flight-training opportunities. Flights carrying heavy loads and formations of more than two aircraft require certain runway conditions that aren't always available on Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst. Since so many Airmen were scheduled to participate in flight training in such a short time frame, the fly-away's planners couldn't afford the risk of wet weather, said Capt. Sean Flynn, who led

the fly-away planning for the 76th ARS.

Captain Petruska emphasized the efficiency and convenience of the location.

"This fly-away enabled us to offer nine different ground training classes combined with nine training sorties to maximize our readiness," he said. "The Puerto Rico location enabled us to get

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Lt. Col. Dan Edwards
78th Air Refueling Squadron commander

these events accomplished without the necessity of long travel times."

Though the trip allowed the Reserve Airmen to maximize their training requirements, it was no easy event to pull off.

"It is very challenging to generate three aircraft in these days of high operations tempo and an aging fleet," said Colonel Edwards. "We couldn't have had such a successful training weekend without the support of the maintenance team, our partners in the 305th Air Mobility Wing and all of the trainers who went on the road with us."

Captain Petruska said he received a lot of support and assistance in the

planning and organization of the fly-away.

"Without the great help of 514th Operations Support Squadron in conjunction with the 514th Maintenance Group we would not have had the jets to do this," he said.

Despite the challenges of organizing the event, Colonel Edwards explained why the fly-away is important for a Reserve unit.

"All flying squadrons with Air Mobility Command have people scattered around the globe every day, so it is a rare occasion when a squadron can be together," he said. "This is especially challenging for a Reserve flying squadron whose members don't live in the local area."

Maximizing training isn't the only benefit of the three-day fly-away.

When not actively involved in a class or training exercise, the Airmen were able to socialize and network with one another in a casual environment, Captain Flynn said.

"When we assemble as a whole, we have the opportunity to share our collective experiences and learn things about one another that might not rise out of the occasional cockpit conversation," Colonel Edwards said. "Most importantly, the fly away gives us the opportunity to reflect on the past year, celebrate our successes, and say farewell to those of us who are moving on."



A UH-60L Blackhawk Helicopter full of Reserve Airmen descends on a landing zone within Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst's vast training range March 26. The helicopter was flown by Soldiers of the New Jersey Army National Guard.



A WEEKEND LIKE WAR

Story & photos by Tech. Sgt. Shawn J. Jones

The sound of chopping rotor blades grew steadily for several moments, announcing the Blackhawk's arrival just before it burst into view over the thick canopy of green pines. It flew a quick path around an opening in the woods as its crew searched for bad guys and a good place to land. The chopper briefly hovered above the landing zone, kicking up dead grass and dust, before the crew lowered it firmly to the ground. Airmen poured out of each side of the Blackhawk, crouching down into defensive positions with rifles raised. The chopper then quickly ascended and flew out of sight, leaving the Airmen with the fading sound of chopping rotor blades.

Explosive ordnance disposal technicians of the 514th Civil Engineer Squadron go to great lengths to ensure their weekend drills provide enough training to prepare themselves for war. During their monthly unit training assembly in March, they performed a training exercise that simulated some of the battlefield challenges they face when deployed.

Afghanistan is covered with rugged mountain ranges, which can make ground transportation slow and inefficient for EOD teams who must respond quickly to potentially explosive emergencies. Helicopters are being used more frequently in the war zone, and the EOD technicians here aim to ensure they know their way around the rotors before they get there.

None of the on-base Air Force units here fly helicopters, but serving at a joint base has its advantages. When the EOD Airmen reached out to some of their neighbors who wear different uniforms, a helicopter battalion from the New Jersey Army National Guard agreed to help.

"Now that we are a joint base, training opportunities have been expanded and